After signing up for EDU 381 and receiving my placement in a first grade classroom at P.S. 188 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I was a little nervous for this brand new experience. I had only been to New York City a few times and mostly stayed in the tourist areas such as Times Square. Also, my only knowledge of inner city schools came from reading articles and participating in discussions in class. My previous placement was in Baldwinsville, a predominately white, rural area outside of Syracuse. Therefore, I was very excited for the opportunity to explore different areas of New York City and experience an urban school first-hand.

Walking down Houston Street, I instantly noticed some of the physical aspects of the Lower East Side of Manhattan that I read about. Dalton Conley, in the book *Honky*, gave a vivid portrayal of this area: describing the graffiti that lined the buildings, the metal grates on shop windows, and the tall red brick projects. I recalled Conley describing the projects as “static monuments” because they failed to change over the years as society evolved around them (Conley, 2002, p. 15). I pictured these buildings standing tall during major events in U.S. history and realized they held a lot of character. Each morning, the area bustled with people commuting to school or work and others opening up their small shops along the way.

After spending a few days at P.S. 188, I began to realize the impact the surrounding area has on the students that I hadn’t thought about before. Many of the children live in the projects surrounding the school making the commute a convenient short walk to school and back each
day. However, a large amount of students reside in the shelters that were near the school. Although, they also have a short walking commute each day, the shelters have a 3 month stay limit. I realized this fact contributed to the low stability rate of the children at P.S. 188, making it difficult for teachers to keep everyone on track and bring new students onto the same levels. I also noticed some barriers the students faced with transportation in this area. For example, the NYC public school buses went on strike forcing students to find other means of transportation during this time. Also, the F subway train that I took each morning is the only subway that comes into this area creating an issue if the train gets shut down. These are all issues the students and their parents must take into account when sending their kids to school each day. There were a number of students who came in late or were absent creating a difficult challenge for my teacher. I noticed the difficulty of trying to keep all of the students on track while their presence in school each day was varied. As a result, I was able to witness first-hand, some impacts the surrounding area had on the classroom and the students.

I have read a number of articles on the No Child Left Behind Act and the stresses of standardized testing on schools; therefore, it did not surprise me that these pressures dominated most of the curriculum at P.S. 188. Unfortunately, other subjects such as social studies were rarely taught and the day was comprised of mainly math and reading. I noticed the teachers were unwilling to take risks with different activities and did not stray too far from the textbook. My classroom was mainly authoritative and the material was not relevant to the students’ lives. As Stovall (2006) predicted in “We Can Relate Hip-Hop Culture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Secondary Classroom,” the students often tested authority and showed no interest in the material. However, I feel if my teacher related the lessons to their lives and incorporated some art in the lessons; the material would have been grasped much easier. For example, we did a lesson on
shapes taken from the textbook and the students were very fidgety with about half the class participating. However, I feel if she taught about shapes in the real world using pictures or the classroom itself, not only would the students become much more interested, they may continue learning outside of school as they begin to notice shapes outside or in their houses.

Gulla’s (2009) article “Changing Things as They Are” discusses a number of ways art can be incorporated into the curriculum and the tremendous benefits that result. The article states that bringing art into the core curriculum will enhance English, literature, and speaking skills along with provide opportunities to incorporate subjects such as social studies into the main lessons. I noticed some of these aspects in my classroom and the effects it had on the students. The students enjoyed reading a poem each morning which helped them learn new words and become more fluent readers. They also sang the days of the week which helped them learn the days in English and Spanish very quickly. The power of music amazes me, especially when incorporated in the classroom. I definitely plan on utilizing music in my lessons when I become a teacher. One program that I really liked and feel it was a step towards the types of lessons Gulla (2009) described in “Changing Things as They Are” was LEAP, Learning through the Extended Arts Program. Twice a week, another teacher would come in and reinforce one of the lessons being taught using movement and art. These lessons appealed to auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners which I felt was a huge advantage. These lessons made the material fun and allowed the students to move around and experience the material rather than listen to it. For example, the teacher did a lesson on shapes by having the students work together to make different shapes using their bodies. These lessons reinforced the ideas I read about in the articles and proved the many benefits of art in the classroom.
The article “Creating Environments of Success and Resilience” discussed the importance of creating a caring environment and developing mutual respect among the students. Bondy, Gallingane, Hambacker, and Ross (2007, p. 346) state in the article that “making respect the central value gives them a way to structure the classroom as a haven for every child, a place where it is safe to take risks, where no one can poke fun at you, and where trying to achieve is a valued activity.” In other words, teachers can help each student succeed and want to learn by creating an environment where the student feels important and supported. During my placement, I talked to individual students whenever I got the chance. I told them about myself and they told me some things about them. It was obvious they liked the attention and the opportunity to talk about some things they are excited about or have planned for the upcoming weekend. I also noticed that the students liked when I asked them for help or to explain something to me because it made them feel important. I spent more individual time with the students who got in trouble the most. I knew they were good kids who truly did want to learn. I noticed when I spent time with them they became more excited about the work and would try harder. They struggled with troubled home lives and lack of sleep and were normally just looking for attention. I loved working with these students because it was so rewarding seeing their faces light up when they finished a book or got a math problem correct.

The highlight of my field placement at P.S. 188 was working with a student named “Ella” (pseudonym). Ella had the hardest time sitting still in class, focusing, and completing work. Every day she was in trouble and would often lose recess. She began coming to school with a negative attitude and didn’t enjoy many of the activities. I began working with her individually and struggled to keep her focus on assignments. I decided to talk to her about other things whenever I got the chance to show her that I cared about her. I then began turning her
assignments into mini-games such as seeing how fast she could write a sentence. I would give her high fives and encouragement every time she succeeded in these mini-challenges. One day I took her to another room to read a math test to her. This task took a longer time because I had to redirect her attention for every problem. However, I noticed that once she was focused, she knew all the answers. She ended up achieving the highest grade on the math test which put the biggest smile on her face. She went and told other teachers and smiled the whole day! This was one of the most rewarding moments I have ever experienced.

Dave Brown stated in his article “Urban Teachers’ Professed Classroom Management Strategies” that “whatever the reasons for children’s behavior—whether poverty, personality, a handicapping condition, a dysfunctional home, or an abusive environment—classroom teachers are responsible for managing children, seeing that they work together in a confined space for long periods, and ensuring that they learn” (Brown, 2004, p. 266). The teachers at P.S. 188 are faced with a tremendous challenge of meeting each student’s unique needs along with the strict state standards. These students come from tough backgrounds and are at all different levels in each subject. I have learned so much from this experience that I can utilize as I become a teacher. From interacting with these students, I fully understand the importance of connecting with each one and developing mutual respect throughout the classroom. I plan on incorporating art into the lessons as a way to appeal to all types of learners, include multiple subjects in one lesson, and create a more relevant curriculum. As a result of this field experience, I feel I am more prepared to become an educator and I am very excited to continue on this path and help as many people as I can reach their own goals.
References


